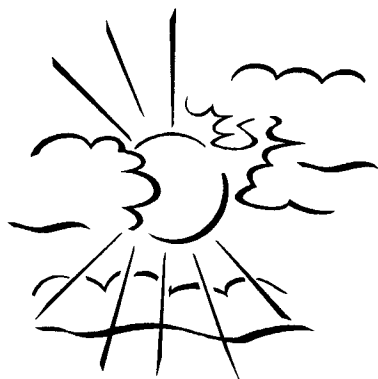


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Monday, February 6, 2006

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Teacher crime list erroneous, some say

Parents demand to know names

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Saturday, February 04, 2006

By Bob Wheaton
bwheaton@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6375

Dottie Vincent thinks parents like herself should be able to see a new - and still secret - state list containing names of school employees with criminal records.

That's despite concerns from school and teachers union officials that some employees mistakenly showed up on the list - which most districts received from the state Department of Education on Thursday or Friday.

"I think the people should be able to find out (the names)," said Vincent, who has a daughter at Flint's Northern High School and a granddaughter at Doyle-Ryder Elementary School.

"If there's a mistake, it can be corrected. And I realize that this might jeopardize some people. But our kids are more important, and we need to get to the bottom of it."

So far, area school officials aren't saying much. Some, such as Flint, say they haven't received the list yet.

But some in the education community are very publicly criticizing the list and are trying to dampen the push for a quick release of the names.

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, spokeswoman for the Michigan Education Association, said the teachers union has been flooded with calls from members whose names were on the list even though they have no criminal record.

"Our first concern is that we need to know, first of all, who belongs on that list before we determine whose name is released in a very public and difficult way," she said. "We believe the public needs to know, first and foremost, the truth."

Among the school districts reporting mistakes on the list Friday were Fenton, Imlay City and North Branch.

Martin Ackley, spokesman for state Education Department, said mistakes could result from like names or from Social Security numbers that had been

About the list
Questions and answers
about a new list of
public school
employees with
criminal records: How
was it compiled? The
state Department of
Education worked with
state police after the
passage of a new state
law requiring the list to
be compiled.

Who's on it? School
employees convicted of
felonies and some
misdemeanors. School
and teachers union
officials say the list also
has many names that
were mistakenly
included.

What happens to
employees on the list?
Those who were
convicted of serious
sexual assaults must be
fired. School districts
have the discretion to
decide how or whether
to discipline employees
convicted of other
felonies and
misdemeanors.

Who has the list? Most
public schools should
have received lists of
their employees on
Thursday or Friday.

Can the public see the
names? In most cases,
probably not yet. Most
local districts were
declining to release any
names as of Friday, and
an Ingham County
circuit court judge
granted a request from
the Michigan Education
Association to at least
temporarily block the
state from revealing
them. The lawsuit came
as the result of a
Freedom of Information
Act request from The
Detroit News. The Flint
Journal has filed a
similar request.

What districts are
reporting Atherton,
Bentley and Davison:
Have received their list
from the state but won't
discuss it yet.
Fenton: Won't reveal
total number of names

stolen. Ackley said the department had fielded a dozen calls from workers who said they were not the people named in the report.

The department directed school workers to state police posts for free fingerprinting to correct the records.

The list is the result of a new state law that called for the Education Department to work with state police to compile a list of school employees convicted of felonies and some misdemeanors. Background checks of school employees found 2,200 felonies among 4,600 criminal convictions. The report was spurred by a state audit critical of the department for not updating criminal histories of those it licenses and certifies, and by a new state law calling for all school employees to be fingerprinted. The law is aimed at getting sex offenders out of schools.

Employees on the list who have been convicted of serious sexual assaults must be fired. Those convicted of lesser offenses can be disciplined by their schools.

An Ingham County judge has granted a request by the MEA and ruled that the state couldn't release the names of the employees. A hearing next week will determine whether the temporary order will continue.

Trimer-Hartley said the list had far more errors than the MEA expected.

"(Thursday and Friday) have been consumed with calls from people who don't belong on the list, people who were 4 years old when the crime took place," she said.

An employee could be on the list because someone with the same name was convicted of a crime, she said, and others could have been the victim of identity theft.

Dave Crabill, the parent of a Swartz Creek High School student, said he'd rather err on the side of protecting children.

"I think we have to do everything possible to protect our kids," he said. "That information should be shared with the schools, and I'd like it to be shared with everyone in the district so we can protect our children.

"In the case of any type of sexual abuse or battering, I don't think they have a right to be in the schools. But if it weren't (as serious as) that, I think we need to trust our elected officials - the school board - to make the decisions as to whether they should be part of the schools or not."

A survey of some local districts reveals sketchy details on what they've received from the state. Fenton Superintendent Peggy Yates declined to say how many names were on the district's list, but said she already had found an error.

Mt. Morris Superintendent Lisa Hagel said two district employees were on the list.

"They were far in the past - not recent," Hagel said. "Items on our list are misdemeanors - not items that would cause any alarm with children or disrupt any staff security."

Lapeer Assistant Superintendent Craig Gerard would say only that the district's list had "relatively few names considering we have 800 employees."

In North Branch, two of five employees on the list have categorically denied the charges, Superintendent Al Piwinski said, and another hasn't worked for the district for three years. A preliminary investigation into the claims of one employee seemed to substantiate that the listing is in error, Piwinski said.

Imlay City's list had two names on it for misdemeanors - neither of whom was a teacher or administrator, Superintendent Timothy Edwards said. One of the names appeared to be on the list inaccurately.

Officials in some districts declined to immediately release any information.

Officials in the Davison, Bentley and Atherton districts confirmed they received the list from the state Thursday or Friday. None would comment about how many employees were listed or who they are.

"We're reviewing the information and getting advice on how to proceed with this," Atherton Superintendent Mark Madden said. "We want to talk to our legal people."

The Genesee Intermediate School District, which employs about 1,000 people, hadn't received a list as of late Friday, said Superintendent Thomas Svitkovich.

Svitkovich also said he would contact a lawyer before publicly releasing any names on the list.

Teacher crime records mislead

Background check turns up bad data

February 4, 2006

BY LORI HIGGINS and PEGGY WALSH-SARNECKI
FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITERS

Tina VanSickle says she has never gotten a traffic ticket, let alone been convicted of a crime. Yet she was called into her school superintendent's office Thursday and shown otherwise.

"I laughed. I thought she was kidding," said VanSickle, 39, a computer teacher at Morley Stanwood Middle School north of Grand Rapids.

Late this week, school districts received records of employees with criminal records -- part of new laws that went into effect this year aimed at ridding schools of sex offenders.

But across Michigan on Friday, some school districts and many unions that represent school employees were reporting some of the information was incorrect.

In Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, two employees were identified as felons, but local police helped the district determine that those two teachers were innocent; they simply shared the names of criminals.

The West Bloomfield School District found several clear inaccuracies, spokesman Steve Wasko said.

The Michigan State Police ran the background checks on about 200,000 school employees, using identifiers such as name, date of birth, Social Security number, race and sex, said Tim Bolles, identification and criminal history section manager for the State Police.

The checks found more than 4,600 criminal offenses, of which 2,200 were felonies, the Associated Press has reported. Anyone with a sexual offense must be immediately fired. Employees with felonies and certain misdemeanors can keep their jobs only if their superintendent and school board take action to allow it.

The Michigan Education Association, a union that represents school employees statewide, said it had gotten about 200 calls on the subject in the last two days, mostly from employees who had been confronted with what they said was incorrect information.

"The indignity, the outrage, the demoralization that's taking place in our school communities right now is scandalous. It's a virtual witch hunt," MEA spokeswoman Margaret Trimer-Hartley said.

In VanSickle's case, the report showed she has seven misdemeanors and one felony. She says she has no criminal record.

"You cannot take this list as gospel. It's not right to persecute people on something that's come up as inaccurate," VanSickle said.

Bolles said that because the checks were based on identifiers like name and Social Security number, it's possible there were "false positives" -- cases where information in an employee's file matched information in the criminal database.

It could be that a criminal, when arrested, used a fake Social Security number that matches that of a school employee. When that employee's background was checked, the crime he or she didn't commit showed up because of the fake Social Security number.

The system is the only one the state can use right now to comply with the new laws. Fingerprint searches will begin starting in July 2008, when all school employees will be required to have fingerprints and background checks on file.

"Fingerprinting is a science. Everybody's fingerprints are different," Bolles said.

Jean Sturtridge, director of legal services and human resources for St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency, and a former prosecutor, said she knows from experience that searches using identifiers like name and date of birth can be unreliable.

"Absent a fingerprint check," she said, "I'm not satisfied that there's a sufficient level of accuracy for me to make any judgments."

The MEA went to court this week and successfully got an injunction barring the Department of Education from publicly releasing the list.

A day later, House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi, answered with legislation aimed at forcing the Department of Education to release the names of convicted felons and sex offenders working in public schools.

"This is not about embarrassing people who are not a threat. Our top concern has to be the kids that are in the classroom and making sure that parents and teachers are aware when potentially violent people serve in our schools or work in our schools," said Jason Brewer, spokesman for DeRoche.

VanSickle now is worried about the impact of her name showing up as a felon.

"My husband and I are in the midst of an adoption," she said. "We are neck deep in it. This could stop everything and that would be awful. And unfair."

*Contact **LORI HIGGINS** at 248-351-3694 or higgins@freepress.com. Staff writer Chastity Pratt contributed to this report.*

What laws require

- Fingerprinting and background checks for all school employees and anyone contracted to work regularly and continuously in a school.
- A ban on anyone convicted of any of the offenses included in the Sex Offender Registration Act working in schools or day care centers.
- Criminal checks for those applying for or renewing a certificate of registration to operate a family day care home or group day care home, a child care center or a day care center.
- Criminal checks on anyone older than 18 residing in the home of a family day care home or group day care home when an application is filed to operate the center.
- A ban on sex offenders working or loitering within 1,000 feet of school property.
- Notification from school employees charged with certain crimes within three working days.

Lori Higgins

School workers say criminal record reports filled with errors

Saturday, February 04, 2006

By Judy Putnam
Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Tina VanSickle, 39, a middle-school computer teacher and a cheerleading coach at the Morley Stanwood School District in Mecosta County, said she's never even had a traffic ticket.

Yet her superintendent got a report this week detailing a criminal history of seven misdemeanors, and one felony for breaking and entering -- a record State Police say belongs to VanSickle. VanSickle said she laughed at first, then got scared: She and her husband are trying to adopt a child.

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, spokeswoman for the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, said Friday that it fielded between dozens and hundreds of calls from school employees who believe they are victims of mistaken identity or errors in the reports. At issue are reports to school districts mailed Wednesday by the Michigan Department of Education that matched a State Police criminal history file against a file of 209,000 school employees. The report was spurred by a state audit critical of the department for not updating criminal histories of those it licenses and certifies and a new state law calling for all school employees to be fingerprinted. The law is aimed at getting sex offenders out of schools.

William Mayes, executive director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators, said school leaders were reporting impossible situations, such as workers whose criminal records show they committed crimes when they were 5 years old.

"We have had a number of responses from superintendents across the state, all with major concerns about inaccuracies," he said.

School employees said the background checks are snagging the wrong people.

"I'm very upset," VanSickle said. "It's just not right, not right at all."

Among her alleged crimes were receiving stolen property, possession of marijuana, driving with a suspended license and domestic violence. Her husband, a high school biology teacher, Bill VanSickle, said they've been sweethearts since she was in the seventh grade, and married for more than 20 years. "I think I'd know that one," he said of the domestic violence conviction. Martin Ackley, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Education, said mistakes could result from like names or from Social Security numbers that had been stolen. Ackley said the department had fielded a dozen calls from workers who said they were not the people named in the report.

"That was part of the purpose, too, of sending it to school districts to be the final and more direct filter of these matches," he said.

A new state law bars sex offenders from working inside schools, and requires other felons to have written permission from administrators and school boards to keep their jobs.

The department directed school workers to State Police posts for free fingerprinting to correct the records. But on Friday, Superintendent Mike Flanagan sent a memo telling school districts to check a database that is free to schools, then use a commercial vendor for fingerprinting if

needed. It's unclear who pays for the fingerprinting checks, which run \$70 if done through the vendor.

The MEA won a temporary restraining order blocking the department from releasing the list. A hearing is set for Friday in Ingham County. It does not block local districts from giving out the information, although many were checking with attorneys for advice on the release of the names. Matt Resch, spokesman for House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi, is pushing for public release of the names so parents can know who's working in their schools.

He said child safety is the most important concern.

"If we have to err on one side, we're going to err on the side of keeping dangerous felons out of our schools," he said.

-- Contact Judy Putnam at (517) 487-8888 x232 or e-mail her at jputnam@boothnewspapers.com.

Saturday, February 04, 2006

New guidelines help teachers defend against false criminal records

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

State officials outlined new guidelines Friday on how school employees who say they are falsely listed as having committed crimes can prove to their districts they are not criminals.

The Michigan State Police and Department of Education's recommendations were in response to a recent criminal background check conducted by the police of all school employees in Michigan. The results of the check, the first of its kind in Michigan, were sent out by the education department to all districts this week, and some school employees believe they were erroneously cited as convicted criminals.

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, spokeswoman for the Michigan Education Association, said her office has been inundated with phone calls from school employees who say they have not committed any of the crimes that their criminal history check says they have.

Such was the case for Tina VanSickle, a middle school teacher and varsity cheerleading coach, who says she's never even had a speeding ticket. But when the letter from the Department of Education reached her superintendent at her Morley Stanwood school district, near Big Rapids, it said VanSickle, 39, had seven misdemeanor convictions and one felony for breaking and entering.

"At first I laughed because it was so ludicrous," said VanSickle, 39, when her superintendent told her of the letter. "She gave me an information sheet on what to do and how to refute the charges."

State officials now want school districts to follow a clear path to address cases such as VanSickle's. School districts should conduct their own criminal history check of employees who say they've been wrongly accused through the police's online criminal history database.

If the search produces no matches, as was the case with VanSickle's, then the employee's innocence has been proven. However, if the employee does show up with a criminal history and still says the record is incorrect, then the employee should be fingerprinted.

The State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Flanagan sent districts a memo this afternoon outlining the next steps. The memo acknowledges that "the search of the state's criminal history database has resulted in some 'false positives' due to stolen/misused Social Security number matches or common name matches.

Frank Ruggirello, spokesman for Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, said the list the district received from the state did include some inaccuracies. The letter cited 18 school employees with criminal records, but five of those employees no longer worked at the district; two were falsely listed as criminals as verified by Canton police, and the 11 remaining have committed misdemeanors. The district is investigating, Ruggirello said.

Tim Bolles, manager of the state police's Identification and Criminal History Section, says the most accurate way to conduct criminal history checks is by fingerprints. But until all school employees are fingerprinted digitally by 2008, state police have to rely on name, date of birth, gender and race searches, which can produce "false positives," he said.

Because the searches are not 100 percent accurate, the MEA, the state's largest teachers union, has filed a lawsuit to block the full release of these criminal background results to the media and the public.

A Feb. 10 court date has been set in Lansing to determine whether a temporary restraining order barring the results will remain.

You can reach Marisa Schultz at (313) 222-2310 or mschultz@detnews.com.

Proving innocence

The state suggests school districts take the following steps when a school employee says he is innocent of the crimes cited on his criminal background check.

The school district should conduct its own background check of the employee using I-CHAT, the state police's criminal history database. That database is available at: <http://mi-mall.michigan.gov/ichat>

If no criminal history is found on I-CHAT, then the employee is cleared. If the employee still shows a criminal history, the employee should be fingerprinted.

Fingerprints should be obtained digitally because the law requires all school employees should be fingerprinted by 2008. The state has a contract with a company called Identix to do the fingerprinting. To find an Identix location, visit <http://www.identix.com/iis> and click on Michigan.

Once the police receive the prints from Identix, an employee can be cleared in about a week.

Source: Michigan State Police

List of school worker felons mostly empty for Bay County

Monday, February 06, 2006

By SCOTT E. PACHECO
BAY CITY TIMES WRITER

A list detailing school employees' criminal histories may have inaccuracies, says the leader of the Bay City schools district.

"I have 100 percent-plus concerns about the accuracy," said Carolyn Wierda, superintendent of Bay City Public Schools.

However, Wierda would not say whether the district had an employee or employees on that list.

"We have received our list and we have no one on the sex offender list, and related to the list we will follow the law," she said.

The lists were prompted by a 2004 audit that criticized the Michigan Department of Education for a lack of oversight of teachers with criminal convictions.

A law effective Jan. 1 expanded that requirement to all school employees, and requires them to self-report any convictions. Employees must be fingerprinted by July 2008.

Those with crimes that would put them on the state Sex Offender Registry must be terminated, according to the new law. Those with any other felony convictions must have written approval from the local board of education to continue employment.

Michael Dewey, superintendent of the Bay-Arenac Intermediate School District, said he had not received his list by Friday, but expects it early this week.

Officials from the Bangor Township, Essexville-Hampton Public Schools and Pinconning public school districts said they do not have any employees on the felons list.

Both Essexville's Corinne Netzley and Bangor's Michael Andress said they would have been surprised to see a name on the list.

They also both said the lists came with a little surprise - misdemeanor violations.

"That is way too much 'big brother,' it really is going too far," Netzley said. "We are educators, we are all absolutely for our kids and some of this is just plain intrusive in areas that are not related."

"I am surprised that we got some misdemeanors," Andress said. "I am not sure that had a lot to do with people teaching."

Andress said he received his list Thursday, while Netzley said she received it Friday.

Pinconning Area Schools Superintendent Darren Kroczaleski said his district also did not have any felons or sex offenders on the list he received Thursday.

"I'm glad that is says what I thought it'd say," he said.

A 1992 law required that all new teachers be fingerprinted for a criminal history check.

The Detroit News reported that of 209,000 public school employees in Michigan, 2,500 were convicted of felony crimes, including more than 100 sex offenders.

- Scott E. Pacheco covers education and business for The Times. He can be reached at 894-9646 or by e-mail at spacheco@bc-times.com.

Published February 6, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Free: In Holland case, let's reserve our concern for the victim: Ricky

A truly tragic end to the Ricky Holland case played out recently.

For some, it was a not-so-surprising end to a case that held an entire community captive with the desperate hope that it would have a happy ending. Sadly, it didn't.

Many in the community, who in those sweltering days in early July helped to search for a child who was already dead, will find themselves struggling with feelings of profound grief and anger: grief for a child who barely had a chance in life; anger for the only two people who police say knew the truth, but stood by and silently watched from their own front window as masses of complete strangers assembled to search for a child they didn't even know.

It's OK to grieve for Ricky. Inevitably, however, many will attempt to make themselves into victims. At a recent candlelight vigil for the young boy, one woman, with tears streaming down her face, professed that she needed closure. One man lamented on how he was going to explain "all of this" to his children.

The experts offer advice on how to monitor our children's reaction to this tragedy and so begins the cycle of self-victimization. Instead of providing our children with a valuable chance to learn and feel compassion for Ricky's biological parents and surviving siblings, we shortchange them into absorbing the tragedy for themselves.

We could offer productive solutions, such as suggesting to our children that they hold a school fundraiser to raise money to aid the lives of Ricky's siblings but that would mean taking the attention off ourselves. More coverage has been given to the members of the Williamston community than to Ricky Holland's own parents.

If there was a pill that was supposed to eradicate the desperation from those who suffered from fantasy-victimization syndrome, then there'd be a lot of addicts ... and that's if any of them were even willing to take it. Because without self-pity, what else would they have to live for?

In certain school districts throughout America, teachers are now using purple ink to grade papers because they feel red ink is too startling to children.

These children are growing up to find themselves unprepared for a world that's not likely to take mercy on them just because they have to stop and sort through their feelings.

Let's recognize that there is only one victim in this tragedy: Ricky.

For a child who had so little, let's at least allow him that much.

John Free lives in Lansing.

Advice

Childhood molestation still haunts woman

Dear Abby: When I was 7, I spent the night at the home of a friend and was molested by her father. It happened again when I was older. That time it was a cousin who spent the night with us. I never told my mother. I was afraid she would blame me. My father never spent time with me — I am one of several children — so it didn't occur to me to tell him.

I have lived with this all my life. I have suffered from low self-esteem and had relationship problems since childhood. Few days have gone by that I haven't thought about it and felt deep personal guilt. I never told anyone until after

my mother died, when I finally confessed it to a psychiatrist.

Now I would like to tell my older brother. Should I? Or would it be more difficult for me if my family knew?

— *Sad, Scared and Confused in Florida*

Dear Sad: Not knowing your family, I can't predict how they'll react. However, this I do know: You were victimized twice as a child. You have done nothing for which to feel guilty. **THE VICTIM IS NEVER AT FAULT.**

Because you still have difficulty accepting this, it appears your sessions with the psychiatrist were



DEAR ABBY
Jeanne Phillips

not as helpful as they should have been. Please pick up the phone and call the Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network. The toll-free number is (800) 656-4673. Counselors there will guide you to specialized services that can help you. Their entire

focus is on helping victims of sexual assault, and the fact that your assault happened long ago should not be a deterrent.

After you have been counseled, and accept that you were never at fault for what happened, it will be safe to tell your brother because, at that point, his reaction will not be all-important to you.

Dear Abby is written by Abigail Van Buren, also known as Jeanne Phillips, and was founded by her mother, Pauline Phillips. Write Dear Abby at www.DearAbby.com or P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, CA 90069.

Monday, February 06, 2006

Health plan may need \$1B

Lawmakers say federal funding is necessary to sustain Mich. initiative for low-income residents.

Gary Heinlein / The Detroit News

LANSING -- Gov. Jennifer Granholm's new insurance plan for low-income residents would rely on \$1 billion in extra funding from the federal government, the Senate's top fiscal adviser said. "We're not really putting up any new money," said Senate Fiscal Agency Director Gary Olson. "Essentially we're saying, 'We're not going to spend any more money, federal government, but please give us a billion dollars.' "

State health officials unveiled a few more details of the complicated proposal -- aimed to help about half of the more than 1 million uninsured Michiganians -- at a Senate hearing last week. The initiative was the centerpiece of Granholm's State of the State address.

Granholm and Health Director Janet Olszewski want to provide health coverage to lower-income state residents who don't qualify for Medicaid. Those who qualify for the new program would receive basic coverage from health maintenance organizations and other private insurers.

It's unclear if action by the Legislature is needed beyond approving state budgets. Olszewski doesn't expect to be able to start offering the coverage until at least April 2007.

The plan "has a solid chance of success," the senators were told by Paul Reinhart, director of medical services administration for the state health department.

In the language of federal regulations, the state wants a waiver, under which Washington would consider providing hundreds of millions in matching funds for the \$400 million the state already is spending on care for the poor.

Chief among those expenditures, Olson said, is \$300 million paid annually out of the general fund to pay for mental health services to low-income residents who don't qualify for Medicaid.

Some lawmakers expressed skepticism about the plan.

Sen. Tom George, R-Kalamazoo, said it's unclear how it would help stem rising health care costs or convince Michiganians to adopt healthier lifestyles. George, a physician, said the state should fix the problems in its Medicaid program before taking on a new plan.

You can reach Gary Heinlein at (313) 222-2470 or gheinlein@detnews.com.

Rival Visions Led to Rocky Start for Drug Benefit

By ROBIN TONER
The New York Times

Published: February 6, 2006

WASHINGTON, Feb. 5 — It was clearly intended to be a transformational moment in American politics: At a center for the elderly in Allentown, Pa., on Sept. 5, 2000, George W. Bush, then a presidential candidate, paid tribute to one of the signature Democratic programs of the last century and promised to improve it.

"Medicare is an enduring commitment of our country," said Mr. Bush, locked in a tight race with Vice President Al Gore. "It must be modernized for our times."

What emerged in the next three years, culminating in the passage of the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act, was an effort to blend a classic big government program from the Great Society with the conservative, market-oriented philosophy of the Republicans in power.

It was supposed to be one of the great domestic policy achievements of the Bush presidency. But today, as state and federal officials struggle to carry out the program, they face widespread complaints from beneficiaries, advocates, pharmacists, lawmakers and others that it is too complex, too cumbersome, too hard to navigate. Congressional committees are holding hearings on problems in the rollout of the plan, which began Jan. 1, and debate has already begun over how to change it.

Even Mr. Bush seems, at the moment, reluctant to proclaim its advantages; he never mentioned the long-sought prescription drug benefit in his 52-minute State of the Union address last week. Administration officials say the start-up of any vast new social welfare program is bound to encounter difficulties; they say these are largely growing pains for a system that covers 42 million older and disabled Americans. They testified last week that competition among private health plans was already lowering expected costs for the program, while giving retirees what they were promised: a wide choice of drug plans at reasonable prices.

But some experts say the new Medicare program, by its very structure, was destined for trouble. Drew Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan health research group, calls it "a compromise between competing ideologies shoehorned into a fixed budget." He added, "I think it was preordained from the moment they passed it that it would be historically complicated to implement."

As they look back, the architects and leading supporters of this plan say that every political decision behind the new Medicare program — its structure, its cost, the way it is delivered — made sense at the time it was made. Taken as a whole, however, the plan's creators came up with a complex hybrid, a melding of government and private markets requiring intricate coordination among insurers, beneficiaries, and state and federal agencies.

In recent weeks, older Americans have struggled to choose from a dizzying array of 40 or more drug plans, with different premiums, co-payments and lists of covered drugs. States have intervened to cover many low-income elderly beneficiaries who were falling between the cracks

in their transition to the new Medicare program. Pharmacists have reported delays and difficulties in determining who is eligible for which benefits.

Representative Bill Thomas, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and a principal architect of the program, defended the Medicare law in an interview and suggested that it was the best a bitterly divided Congress could do.

"We got the bill we could get," said Mr. Thomas, a California Republican. "And then those who tried to make sure it wasn't law began immediately to attack it."

In fact, the Medicare law is a case study in political accommodation in an ideologically polarized time — the difficulty in bridging sharply different worldviews on the roles of government and private markets — and the consequences of that accommodation in the real world, when the program begins.

A Need for Change

Republicans began to push for a drug benefit in the late 1990's. By then, drug costs were soaring; elderly men and women regularly rose, tearfully, at public meetings to plead with members of Congress for help. And the demands from AARP, the retirees' lobby, had reached a crescendo. Nobody could afford to ignore a crucial constituency and its demands for relief, certainly not the Republicans in charge of the House, the Senate and, by 2001, the White House. Top Republican strategists asserted that their party — which had been haunted, in election after election, by its resistance to the creation of Medicare in 1965 — had to seize the initiative this time.

"It increasingly became the opinion in the White House that this was probably the right thing to do, and it also made sense politically," said Thomas A. Scully, then the administrator of the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

But the party was led by conservatives and mindful of its base; the conservatives wanted to create a Medicare drug benefit that minimized the role of government as much as possible.

"It was a program that needed to be fixed, but it was fixed in a Republican way," said John Feehery, a former top aide to J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois, the speaker of the House. "A private sector solution, as opposed to a huge increase in government control. If Democrats were in control, they would have just fixed prices and let the government pay for it."

In fact, many liberals argued that the easiest way to add a drug benefit to Medicare was, quite simply, to add a drug benefit to Medicare. Let the federal government use its immense bargaining clout to secure discounts and provide a standard benefit, just as it does for hospitals and doctors, they reasoned.

Republicans countered that this approach would amount to government price controls that would stifle innovation.

Instead, they envisioned a marketplace of private health insurers that would negotiate prices individually with drug companies, then compete to sell drug benefits to the elderly. The government would subsidize the benefits, with extra help for low-income people. Older Americans would get a choice of plans, and the competition among private plans would hold down costs and keep the benefits up-to-date.

Democrats and their allies argued that Republicans were bowing to a powerful industry that was fearful of the negotiating power of the government and desperate to protect its profits. "This was the product of the special-interest lobbying of the drug industry," said Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, a liberal advocacy group.

The pharmaceutical industry did have substantial influence on Capitol Hill. But the structure of the drug benefit was also framed by a core conservative belief: that "one-size-fits-all" benefit

programs, administered by the government, were an outmoded vestige of the Great Society and the New Deal.

Some conservative and moderate Democrats shared a preference for pushing more responsibility onto private insurers, including former Senator John B. Breaux of Louisiana, who would play a crucial role in the 2003 law.

"I got so tired of sitting in the back room of the Finance Committee deciding whether oxygen providers should get a 0.25 percent increase or a 0.36 percent increase," Mr. Breaux said. But in general, this was a sharply ideological division on Capitol Hill.

Even with a market-oriented approach, the drug benefit was a hard sell to many conservatives. They were dismayed at the idea of expanding an entitlement program that was already facing serious financial problems in the next 20 years. They wanted bigger changes in Medicare — and Mr. Bush did, too.

Tension Within the Parties

By the winter of 2002-03, the administration agreed to set aside \$400 billion for a 10-year Medicare plan — a powerful inducement to act. But Mr. Bush insisted that any Medicare law had to include the broader structural reforms that conservatives believed could save money and improve benefits in the long haul.

Mr. Bush and his allies were pushing a system in which many more beneficiaries obtained all their medical care — not just their drug benefits — through private health plans, which would receive a fixed sum from the government. That was a striking departure for the traditional government insurance program, in which doctors and hospitals are reimbursed for their services according to rates set by the government.

One of the tensions within the Republican Party throughout 2003 was how much of this broader "reform" needed to be in the legislation. More pragmatic politicians feared any legislation that seemed to be forcing older Americans to leave traditional Medicare, which is still immensely popular, and join private health plans. More conservative politicians pushed back.

As the Senate began to move on Medicare legislation, Democrats had tensions of their own. Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, and others, argued that Democrats should work with Republicans and seize the opportunity to pass drug legislation. The logic was simple: get something passed, lock in the \$400 billion and improve it later. The Senate passed a Medicare drug bill in June 2003, with substantial Democratic support.

A Complicated Compromise

The dynamics were different in the much more conservative House. House leaders struggled, repeatedly, to prevent a large-scale rebellion on the right; the Medicare bill initially squeaked through the House in June 2003 by just one vote. After that, the last thing many House Republicans wanted, when they began negotiations with the Senate, was a bill that moved to the left.

Former Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, then the Democratic leader and a member of the negotiating team, said, "Those of us with different views were first, not heard, and then physically locked out."

Mr. Thomas, the House Ways and Means Committee chairman, dismissed that notion, saying the Democrats interested in reaching a deal — Senator Max Baucus of Montana and Senator Breaux of Louisiana — were welcomed into the room.

Another crucial player was AARP, which was also eager for a deal.

The final legislation reflects the complicated compromises of those last frenzied months of negotiation. Conservatives insisted on an array of incentives in the bill to attract more private

insurers and inject more competition into Medicare. Representative Paul D. Ryan, an influential young Republican from Wisconsin, said he personally called several major insurance executives in the days before the final vote to make sure they would participate in the new program. But AARP and other groups insisted that the traditional Medicare program be protected from a competition rigged to favor private plans. Many lawmakers, who otherwise disdained the market-oriented approach, were drawn to the bill because of its substantial benefits for low-income elderly Americans. Other lawmakers, particularly in the Senate, were drawn by the legislation's new assistance for rural areas.

Piece by piece, the legislation grew. "You really had to fold into this final product many different views," said Senator Olympia J. Snowe, Republican of Maine, a longtime supporter of a drug benefit. "You had a cross between those who wanted a government-run program and a government delivery system, and those who wanted it totally private or not at all."

The number of lawmakers who said they were voting for the legislation with misgivings was striking. In the end, the bill passed the House, but only after the roll call vote was held open three hours while Republican leaders muscled together a majority. The bill passed the Senate more comfortably, although most Democrats, including Mr. Kennedy, voted against it.

The partisan atmosphere was poisonous.

Robert D. Reischauer, president of the Urban Institute, an expert on Medicare and a former Congressional budget director, said in a recent interview, "We have in this country a long tradition of passing seriously flawed legislation, and then spending the next decade trying to fix it, to the extent possible."

Already, lawmakers in both parties are reviewing the rollout of this program, which many say has been handled badly.

Even moderates who supported the legislation are put off by the complexity of the new benefits.

"There's just way too many plans," said Mr. Baucus, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee.

Many conservatives say most of the structural changes they wanted to hold down costs were jettisoned in the legislative process. "Horrible," is how John Goodman, a health adviser to the Bush campaign in 2000, describes it today.

A Difficult Transition

The partisan wars over Medicare are, if anything, intensifying. Many Republicans say the relentless Democratic critique has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"What I find ironic is the Democrats and the labor unions chose to trash this law for two full years, and then in the 11th hour say we need to extend the signup because people are confused," Mr. Thomas said. "Who produced the confusion?" He also faults the news media for highlighting those complaints rather than the accomplishments of the program.

Polls show that older Americans remain skeptical. In the latest New York Times/CBS News Poll, only 14 percent of Americans 55 and older said they expected their prescription drugs to cost less by the end of Mr. Bush's second term than they do today.

Many outside analysts say it is too soon to render judgment on the program. Administration officials say the program is already working for the majority of beneficiaries. With a transition this large, people need time to adjust, to learn their way around a new market, said Mark McClellan, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

John C. Rother, policy director for AARP, said: "My own view is it's going to be bumpy and sloppy, but it's going to work. People will work their way through their choices, and the number of plans will consolidate."

Mr. Reischauer, the Urban Institute leader, voiced the realpolitik that animated so much of the support for this plan: "I'd make the case that it's a lot better health policy than what we had before," he said, meaning no drug benefit at all. Others wonder whether the system could have done better.

Oakland County

County may stop offering drug benefit for seniors

Officials are studying its two programs to determine if Medicare plans would be the better option.

Maureen Feighan / The Detroit News
February 6, 2006

HAZEL PARK -- With a pacemaker and macular degeneration that affects her eyesight, 80-year-old Mildred Skoczylas of Hazel Park takes eight prescriptions a day to keep her healthy -- all while on a tightly fixed income.

That's why Skoczylas, who relies on Social Security and a small pension as her sole income, decided to take her pharmacist's advice when he suggested she switch from Oakland County's senior prescription discount program to the new Medicare option.

Her wallet is already thanking her. An \$80 eyedrops prescription that used to cost her about \$56 under the county's program cost her around \$30 with her new Medicare card.

"Isn't that a great savings?" Skoczylas said.

But as more and more seniors like Skoczylas abandon the county's two prescription discount programs for the more comprehensive Medicare option, because rules prohibit them from being in both, county officials are contemplating discontinuing their programs.

Enrollment in the county's Senior Prescription Discount Program for residents 60 and up has plummeted from a high of 20,000 roughly three years ago to approximately 5,896 as of last count, said Gerald Poisson, one of Oakland County's deputy county executives.

That's why, Poisson said, county officials are studying the county's two programs -- one for those under 60, another for those over 60 -- to determine if Medicare is a better option and if certain populations might still be better served by the county's programs. He said county officials will make a recommendation to the county's board of commissioners in the next 30 to 60 days on whether to continue or end the programs.

"Our preliminary finding so far is that the Medicare program is a better program because it covers more drugs, and it's just more comprehensive," Poisson said.

Pharmacist Mike Maringo, owner of Maringo's Pharmacy in Hazel Park, agrees. He has approximately 15 customers who were in the county's program, 10 of whom have switched to the Medicare program like Skoczylas.

"The county's program was very, very good if people had nothing else," said Maringo, whose pharmacy has been in business since 1945.

"It was definitely better than having nothing. But the Medicare option will be much better."

Oakland County has two prescription programs and advertises for a third, Prescription Relief, that isn't run by the county.

The first, the Senior Prescription Discount Program, was started three years ago. Administered by Express Scripts, a privately held, third-party prescription benefits manager, it's open to any permanent Oakland County resident over 60 regardless of income. The county pays an annual subscription fee of \$6. A second program is for residents under 60. For an annual fee of \$20 for families and \$14 for individuals, participants can obtain discounts of up to 40 percent on generic medications and 15 percent on name-brand drugs.

At the time the 60-and-up program was created, the Board of Commissioners included a stipulation that if the state or federal government "creates a prescription program that is equal to or better than this program," the county would terminate its program.

Poisson said that's why county officials are analyzing what they offer. If the programs are ended, he said the goal is to have as "seamless" a transition as possible for those who qualify for the Medicare option. The deadline to apply for coverage for next year is May 15.

Poisson said county officials also are reviewing prescription drug programs offered by the state and National Association of Counties.

Skoczylas, for one, doesn't want to see the county's programs end. She said without coverage, she would have had nothing.

"If you have nothing else, it is a help," she said. "(But) Medicare, I hope, will be much better."

You can reach Maureen Feighan at (248) 647-7416 or mfeighan@detnews.com.

Seniors: Be wary of Medicare pitches

Sunday, February 05, 2006

schourey@kalamazoogazette.com 388-8575

Seniors enrolling in a Medicare Part D prescription drug plan should watch out for salespeople peddling insurance plans that are either unnecessary or ill-suited to their needs, said Peggy Sattler, program director of the Area Agency on Aging.

She said she has heard from several seniors who think they were exploited by insurance company representatives.

"People don't understand what they're buying, and they're being told that there's no cost," in some instances, Sattler said.

Medicare Part D, a prescription drug benefit plan administered by private insurance companies, was approved in 2003 and became effective Jan. 1 of this year. Medicare-eligible participants have until May 15 to sign up for a plan without being penalized.

Supporters say it will reduce drug costs and make it easier for senior citizens and the disabled to buy prescription drugs. But across the country, seniors and pharmacists have reported widespread frustration, difficulty filling prescriptions and a range of other problems with the plan.

Sattler, who also is coordinator of the Access to Benefits Coalition, recommends the following precautions for those signing up for a new plan:

- Do not let an insurance agent inside your home without an appointment.

- Do business with local insurance agents you know or who have been referred to you.

- If you do not want to buy a new or different plan, do not invite a salesperson to your home just to be nice or to hear what he or she has to say.

- Do not sign anything unless you would like to buy a new plan.

- Be suspicious if you are told a plan has no cost or if the agent provides no paper materials on the plan.

Sattler urged seniors with concerns to call the Access to Benefits Coalition 373-5173 or the Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program at 382-0515.

Try to fix Part D before deciding to scrap it

Kalamazoo Gazette Editorial

Monday, February 06, 2006

It has been more than a month since Medicare's Part D prescription drug coverage program was launched.

The confusion and frustration over what is covered and what is not seems to be subsiding. Complaints by seniors that they are not able to get the medications they have been prescribed are lessening. Yet it is clear that Part D needs some adjustments.

Because many seniors have been having difficulty getting necessary drugs, the Bush administration last week asked the private insurers through which the prescription benefit is administered to provide beneficiaries with an extra 60-day supply of their medications in emergency situations.

But that's just a stop-gap proposal.

The widespread confusion and frustration over Part D is not just on the part of elderly patients, but also by pharmacists and doctors who are having trouble navigating the program. So it's clear that the program merits some adjustments.

U.S. Sens. Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow last week introduced legislation, their so-called Medicare Part D Reform Act, which would:

Prohibit drug plans from changing the list of drugs covered during a calendar year. Instead, the plans could only change their list of covered medication on Jan. 1, and only after notifying beneficiaries during the period when they are able to change plans.

End parts of Part D that caused poor beneficiaries to lose the ability to participate in pharmaceutical companies' discount programs.

Allow the government to negotiate bulk discount drug prices, a savings to taxpayers.

We would urge federal lawmakers to give serious consideration to the Levin-Stabenow proposal. Critics of the Part D program complain that it is extraordinarily expensive, especially considering that many seniors are not much helped by it, and that it is a windfall for drug companies, especially because the federal government is not allowed, the way the law is written now, to negotiate bulk drug discounts.

Last week, U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., went so far as to demand that Part D be scrapped entirely and that the Bush administration go back to the drawing board.

We're not ready to go that far, after only a month.

But there certainly are some flaws in this extraordinarily complicated program. It will take months to discover them all and find ways to eliminate them.

We urge lawmakers to work together toward solutions, instead of allowing this to become fodder for more partisan battles.

Michigan

CHRIS CHRISTOFF: DeVos' bold idea: Big Medicaid cuts

February 6, 2006
Detroit Free Press

Kill Medicaid?

It's worth considering, said Dick DeVos, the presumed Republican nominee for governor.

Not all of Medicaid, which provides health care to 1.4 million Michigan residents. But DeVos said he likes what Missouri has done.

And what Missouri did was eliminate Medicaid for as many as 100,000 people, about 10% of its caseload, to save an estimated \$310 million this fiscal year.

It stopped paying for so-called optional items like feeding tubes, walkers, crutches, prosthetics and physical therapy. It raised health care premiums for low-income families. It cut off Medicaid for disabled people who work part-time.

Unless the Missouri legislature steps in, the state's entire Medicaid program will cease in 2008.

"Let's look at what Matt Blunt, who's the governor of Missouri did ... he said, 'We're simply going to end the program,' " DeVos said on Michigan Public Television's "Off the Record."

Well, besides cost savings, the Missouri plan produced media reports of hardship, like the disabled woman who wound up in a nursing home with body sores from a wheelchair because Medicaid stopped paying for her body braces.

Or the man who lost fingers to amputation, and blamed it on Medicaid cuts. Or a man who killed himself after Medicaid cut off his medication.

Such stories are giving Missouri's governor and lawmakers second thoughts.

Still, they did what many in Michigan would like to do but won't because of the political blowback. Gov. Jennifer Granholm has protected Medicaid from any real cuts, including benefits that aren't required by the federal government.

Those who suggest cutting state-paid health care to poor and elderly people are labeled cruel. So far, they've backed off.

But Medicaid is state government's worst budget headache. It costs Michigan \$7.5 billion in state and federal funds. Of that, \$2.1 billion comes directly from Michigan taxpayers -- more than is spent on universities and prisons combined. The lion's share covers health care for children, elderly and disabled people.

Medicaid costs may rise as much as \$500 million next year without cost controls, according to Tom Clay, analyst for the Citizens Research Council. Everyone says something should be done, but no one knows how. So now comes DeVos -- heir to one of America's biggest family fortunes -- who'd slash health care for poor people to pay for business tax cuts. There's some class war symbolism for you. It must have Granholm's re-election team rubbing its hands with glee and muttering, "Bring it on."

DeVos also said we should scrap the Single Business Tax, without suggesting a way to replace it. The SBT brings the state \$1.9 billion in revenue, or 23% of a budget that also pays for universities, prisons, social services and public safety.

DeVos told "Off the Record" the jobs created by eliminating the SBT would outweigh concerns over the state budget.

"Those are consequences we can resolve," he said.

I'll cut. You stitch.

Slashing Medicaid and wiping out one-fourth of the state budget with a tax cut are not timid ideas.

Conservatives will give DeVos credit for contemplating big moves for big issues.

They're also big targets.

He might want to invest in some thick armor plating. His campaign is going to need it.

Contact **CHRIS CHRISTOFF** at 517-372-8660 or christoff@freepress.com.

Community Caring event to focus on helping uninsured

HOMETOWN HEADLINES

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Saturday, February 04, 2006

By Shantell M. Kirkendoll

skirkendoll@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6366

GENESEE COUNTY- Helping the uninsured will be in the spotlight of the upcoming Community Caring Awards Breakfast, and nominations are being accepted through March 1 to recognize volunteer efforts.

Award nominations will be accepted for providing financial assistance for services or supplies, discounted or in-kind services, volunteering for the uninsured or working to address issues related to living without health insurance.

Any local individual, organization or business can be nominated. Forms are available from Health Access at (810) 232-4200 or www.healthaccess.org.

Letters for February 5, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

No free health care

I have been pushed over the edge by another comment about Canada's government health care program. In a front page article, Chris Brzozowski referred to the "free" health care ("What should Bush say?" Press, Jan. 31). Evidently, he has not traveled to Canada.

Using Ontario as an example, one will pay 7 or 8 percent Provincial (state) Sales Tax (PST) on goods, and another 7 or 8 percent Governmental Sales Tax (GST) on all goods and services including gasoline, McDonald's, hotel rooms, Blue Jay's tickets, etc.

So, a total of at least 15 percent tax on everything but groceries. Hmmm, seeing that the GST goes toward health care programs (along with a very high income tax), doesn't sound like "free" to me.

I would love to see our government announce a federal health care program that would add another 7 percent to our sales tax. Would the public embrace this? I think not.

So, before people start touting federal health care, think about what it would cost us, the public! Nothing is ever "free," especially when the government has a hand in it!

Oh, before I forget, when people leave Canada, they can fill out a form and submit all their sales slips to have the GST they paid refunded, seeing they have no stake in their health care system.

JAN JAKUBOWSKI/Greenville

U-M dental students 'Give Kids a Smile' Day of care free for kids from low-income families

Sunday, February 05, 2006

BY DAVID JESSE

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

By the time Terrell Jones walked out of the University of Michigan's School of Dentistry Saturday afternoon with a freshly polished smile, he was ready to admit a trip to the dentist might not be that bad.

But if you would have talked to him on his way into the clinic, Terrell, 9, of Ann Arbor, would have told you a different story.

"It wasn't too bad," he said. "They were pretty nice and kept talking to me. I didn't mind it that much. I don't really like going to the dentist."

Jones was among around 50 children who came to the school Saturday to have their teeth cleaned, x-rays taken and other oral health work done by U-M dental and dental hygiene students.

The event was part of the national "Give Kids a Smile" event, which is put on by the American Dental Association. The event started three years ago and has helped more than 1 million children nationwide.

About 125 volunteers worked at the free dental clinic to provide the services for children of local low-income families.

The event is a way for students to combine learning with helping, said Aimee Snell, a fourth-year dental student and one of the event's organizers.

"As students we're always looking for ways to help people, both on campus and in the community," she said. "It's a tremendous feeling to be able to help out people who might not get a chance to get some dental work done. Plus, we're always looking for more chances to learn."

In addition to the dental work, the children who came to Saturday's event received a free oral health kit, including a toothbrush, toothpaste, floss and information about good oral health.

"I said I'd brush twice a day and use the (floss)," Terrell said. "I didn't have any cavities this time and don't want any."

David Jesse can be reached at djesse@annarbornnews.com or at 734-994-6937.

Center for Family Health offers free dental checkups for kids

Saturday, February 04, 2006

By Brian Wheeler
bwheeler@citpat.com -- 768-4928

Dr. Jane Grover was busy but had to smile. At day's end, dozens of local children were ready to do the same.

Grover, dental director for the Center for Family Health, was thrilled to see new faces who came in for free care on the annual Give Kids a Smile Day.

The center's dental clinic at 817 W. High St. is devoting Friday and today to treating people -- maybe 200 by the time it's all done -- many of whom don't get much dental care.

"We are grateful to have days like this," Grover said, "because all hands are on deck and we get to see new kids."

The Jackson clinic's promotion is part of a nationwide push to get more care for children's teeth. A 2000 U.S. surgeon general's report said close to two in five children don't see a dentist before starting school, and dental decay can lead to other health problems.

The promise of free checkups, plus kid-friendly videos and activities, brought about 50 patients to the Jackson clinic by midday, with many more expected today.

John Twining, Wilson Elementary School's social worker, brought five first- and fourth-graders. "Some of the kids needed dental work to be done, and this was an opportunity," he said.

Jackson resident Dorothy Ashley took time from getting to know her three new foster children -- the

12-, 10- and 8-year-old siblings spent their first day with her Friday -- to get them checkups. She only learned of the clinic as she enrolled them at Frost Elementary and was searching for their medical care. As they lined up

for balloons, Ashley said they showed no worries about seeing a dentist. "They're fine with it," she said. "They know they needed to get it done."

Labor organizing surges in child care

2/5/2006, 5:21 p.m. ET

By DAVID CRARY

The Associated Press

MLIVE

PAWTUCKET, R.I. (AP) — The living room teems with toys and picture books; six small children are snacking around a tot-sized table. Yet Norma Tetrault's home, as much as any union hall or picket line, represents a pivotal front for America's embattled labor movement.

Women like Tetrault, working from home, have become foot soldiers in a difficult but potentially momentous nationwide campaign to unionize hundreds of thousands of low-paid child-care workers.

Organizing has been vigorous in several states, including Michigan.

Unprecedented breakthroughs have come recently in Illinois and a few other states, while in Rhode Island — despite a strong union legacy — there were painful setbacks last year. Tetrault, echoing the resolve of union leaders nationwide, vows to persevere.

"We're in this for the long haul," she says, standing with feet in two rooms so she can grant an interview and still keep watch on her charges. "Every time you take five steps forward, you take 10 steps back. But I'm not quitting."

Nationally, child-care providers are among the lowest paid of U.S. workers, often earning less than \$10 an hour. A recent federal survey listed only 18 other types of jobs, out of 770, that paid less.

The low pay, lack of health insurance and other benefits, and a sense of being disrespected has produced a legion of workers open to unionization as the most viable strategy for gaining clout. And their interest is now reciprocated: faced with declining overall membership, major unions see child-care providers as a vital source of potential growth and are competing to represent them.

"This is a very untraditional area in terms of organizing," said Anna Burger, secretary-treasurer of the 1.8 million-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which is at the forefront of efforts to represent the providers.

"It's mostly women, working in their own homes," Burger said. "The fact that they're wanting to come together and have a collective voice is remarkable. It shows their determination and creativity."

Reliable nationwide statistics are elusive when it comes to child-care employment, partly because of high turnover, partly because many providers are unlicensed and care for just a few children. The Center for the Child Care Workforce estimates there are about 550,000 people employed by child-care centers and another 650,000 home-based providers; the portion of them who are unionized recently has surged past 10 percent.

The biggest breakthrough came in Illinois, where SEIU last year won the right to represent 49,000 in-home providers serving children whose fees are covered by state and federal funds. In December, after Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich ordered the state to negotiate, SEIU obtained a \$250 million, 39-month contract that will raise providers' daily rates an average of 35 percent and eventually bring them health coverage.

It was the first such statewide contract. Even at a time when many states are struggling to cut costs and meet rising health-care bills, it sparked hopes among union leaders of similar gains elsewhere.

In Washington state, about 10,000 in-home providers voted last year to join SEIU. They hope to gain collective bargaining rights this year.

Last fall, Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski directed state agencies to open talks with child care providers represented by SEIU's main rival, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. This year, Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack ordered talks with representatives of his state's 13,000 in-home providers, whose earnings average less than \$15,000 a year.

While SEIU and AFSCME are competing to represent the Iowa workers, the two giant unions have agreed to form a unified child-care organization in California and Pennsylvania. Organizing also has been vigorous in Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin and elsewhere.

Though unionized workers at child-care centers in Connecticut and New York City have staged strikes in the past two years, AFSCME organizer Denise Dowell says union leaders view the industry as very different from those that routinely produce labor-management conflict.

"It's not a question of going to an employer and saying we want better pay — parents are paying what they can," Dowell said. "This is about building a movement that's going to change the flow of public resources, so standards are raised and more kids have access to quality early education."

Fred Brooks, a social work professor at Georgia State University, said the providers would be wise to get parents on their side.

"It's an easy argument to make, that what's good for the worker is good for the child," he said. "The unions have to get out there and make that argument."

Thus far the unionization drive has made little headway in the South, the Great Plains or the Rocky Mountain states, and last year's setbacks in Rhode Island illustrated that obstacles can arise even in a traditionally union-friendly state.

First, Republican Gov. Don Carcieri vetoed a bill that would have allowed 1,300 home-based providers who care for state-subsidized children to negotiate with the state over pay, working conditions and training incentives. Carcieri called the bill a "travesty" that would be too costly for taxpayers; lawmakers didn't try to override the veto.

Then in November, in another victory for Carcieri, a judge ruled that home daycare providers such as Norma Tetrault — although they receive much of their income from the state — are not state employees and thus not entitled to bargain collectively. The judge overturned a 2004 decision by Rhode Island's Labor Relations Board.

Carcieri was joined in opposing unionization by the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, which also was concerned about costs, and the state's largest newspaper, the Providence Journal, which irked providers by referring to them in an editorial as "babysitters."

"They look at us as a whole bunch of uneducated women who just want more money," said Rosemary Raygada, 38, who runs a small child-care operation out of her Providence home. An immigrant from Peru, Raygada notes that a majority of the providers who forged links with SEIU are Hispanic, black and Asian.

"If it was mostly white women, they'd get their way," said Raygada, who doesn't buy the government argument that unionized child care workers would stress the state budget.

Raygada and Tetrault, like many providers, say they need and deserve higher pay but insist the union drive is more about respect than money. They want the state to speed up payments, improve benefits, and confer on ways to make state regulations more efficient.

"People don't look at us as professionals," Tetrault said. "Our job is viewed as something we just fell into. Well, I didn't fall into it. This is a calling. You do it because you love it."

Now 49, Tetrault was a Head Start teacher for 11 years before shifting 10 years ago to become a self-employed child-care provider at her modest wood-frame home in Pawtucket.

She said she rises at 5 a.m. each weekday and, with help from her husband, cares for five to eight children from 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

It can get hectic — she recalled an afternoon when one child was vomiting, another had diarrhea, two were fighting over a toy, and the telephone kept ringing.

"We're maybe a little crazy to take on this job," she said. "But I fall in love every day. The day I stop laughing at the things they do, I need to quit."

Looking out for kids

Grand Rapids Press Editorial

Saturday, February 04, 2006

A recent Grand Rapids case provides ample reason for the state to make changes in its day-care licensing practices and take a more aggressive approach to protecting children in day-care facilities.

A local day-care home was allowed to remain open despite sexual abuse allegations against the owner, the discovery of pornography on a computer in the home and a state worker's recommendation to revoke the license.

The day-care owner now faces sexual assault and child pornography charges. Prosecutors filed charges last September -- four years after the first abuse allegation was made. The state suspended the day-care license after police filed charges.

The Grand Rapids case also may be cause to reconsider the current oversight process, in which administrators in Lansing can overrule license revocation recommendations by field investigators.

Months before police charged Kristopher Cross with sexually abusing three girls in his day-care home and keeping child pornography, a state investigator recommended that his license be revoked. The recommendation was overruled by Department of Human Services administrators in Lansing.

James Gale, director of the Office of Children and Adult Licensing, said it is not typical for DHS administrators to overrule field workers. He said early in the Grand Rapids case evidence was lacking and yanking a license based on allegations alone does not afford day-care owners due process.

Lawmakers and day-care regulators must find a way to balance due process with the overarching need to keep children safe.

Not only was the license of the Grand Rapids home not pulled by the DHS, but Mr. Cross and his wife, Amanda, were granted a license renewal in May 2005. That was three months after police determined that nude images on a computer confiscated from their home were of children. Prosecutors, however, didn't charge Mr. Cross until a third child came forward with abuse allegations last August. Similar allegations had been made against Mr. Cross in 2002 and 2004.

While the state was aware that porn had been found in the Cross' home, Mr. Gale says neither the Kent County Prosecutor's Office nor the local police informed the DHS that it was child pornography. He says an immediate license suspension would have been the result had his office been informed of that detail last February.

Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, and chair of the Senate Families and Humans Services Committee, held a hearing last month in Lansing to grill DHS about its licensing policies and discuss how to prevent any similar incidents. The DHS is scheduled to report back to Mr. Hardiman this month with recommendations that would close any communication gaps between DHS and law enforcement officials; make clear whether pornography of any kind found in a day-care center is reason enough to pull a license; and discuss how to notify parents when a day-care operation is under investigation, without violating the due process rights of day-care owners.

Whatever is best for children attending day-care facilities should guide any recommendations. Their welfare and safety must be aggressively protected.

Child care costly for commuters

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Sunday, February 05, 2006

By Shantell M. Kirkendol

skirkendoll@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6366

Parents, add another equation to the cost of commuting: The longer you drive, the more child care costs eat up your wages.

Even if that sounds like a no-brainer, you might be surprised how much of a difference it makes.

Consider Lapeer County, where the typical commute is nearly 10 minutes longer than the statewide average - and where parents spend 21 percent of their paychecks on child care, compared with 16 percent on average statewide, according to the recently released Kids Count Data Book.

Kids Count is a nonprofit children's advocacy group.

"If I worked closer to home, I wouldn't have to have him in child care so long," said Angela Evangelista of North Branch, whose 18-month-old son, Montgomery, goes to the Family Circle Children's Learning Center in Lapeer each workday.

Evangelista, 32, is a Rochester mortgage officer. Her husband, a builder, also commutes to Oakland County, and the couple spends about \$550 a month on child care.

If their son spent less than seven hours a day at the center, they could pay less, she said.

Christine Riker, owner of Family Circle on Lapeer Road, said at least half of the parents with children at Family Circle work outside Lapeer County in Flint, Rochester, Auburn Hills and Troy.

She's mindful that parents battle traffic congestion out of the Detroit-metro area to get to their children in the evenings.

"We've extended our hours to help with that," said Riker, whose center takes preschool and school-age kids and is open until midnight.

QUICK TAKE

Longer commute, bigger child care bill?

New data on child care costs show some correlation between commute time and child care expenses. The average U.S. commute time is 25.5

minutes. In Lapeer County, where many residents work elsewhere, families spending for child care each month is higher than the state average of 16 percent:

Child care spending
Commute Dollars
Percent Avg. yearly
County in minutes
spent of wages
wage, 2003

Lapeer	35.3	\$504
	21.0	\$28,741
Livingston	31.0	
	\$628	22.0 \$34,106
Shiawassee	27.6	
	\$447	19.8 \$27,141
Oakland	26.5	\$653
	16.6	\$47,163
Genesee	25.6	\$514
	16.7	\$36,903

Sources: Kids
Count Data Book,
2005; U.S. Census
Bureau

"We have a big share of people who live in Lapeer County but don't have jobs here," said Mike Lexin of the Lapeer County Intermediate School District. Census data says about half of county residents' jobs are outside the county.

Census figures also show the average drive to work for Lapeer County residents is 35 minutes, and that there are more residents commuting than ever. The county's population is booming at 92,510 in 2004, up from 74,768 in 1990. Most of that growth is residents who have relocated from somewhere else.

The Evangelistas moved to Lapeer County just two months ago, building a home on quiet land once set aside for hunting.

"We searched for a home in Oakland County, and frankly nothing satisfied us or our needs," Angela Evangelista said of her family of seven which includes four other children, ages 18, 16, 15 and 13. "And we do like the country."

The commute from the bucolic landscape to the metro area is 75-90 minutes a day, said Evangelista, on roads they share with the estimated 9,897 people who commute from Lapeer to Oakland County.

With all of that travel, the Lapeer County average spending on child care is \$516 a month, slightly more than the state average of \$504, according to Kids Count - even though care is less expensive in Lapeer County than elsewhere, according to federal findings.

The connection between costs and commutes can also depend on where parents look for care - near their homes or near their jobs - said Heady Gist, database manager for 4C Child Care unlimited, a nonprofit childcare research and training group.

"If parents find care near their home, then they're dropping off first, then commuting," she said.

"That couple of extra hours on the road means paying for child care while you're driving."

Child care is more expensive in the metro area, but parents weigh more than cost when deciding who'll watch their children.

Angela Rossio, 29, was raised in Lapeer County and lives in Columbiaville with her two children, ages 6 and 8 months, but she earns a living in Grand Blanc as an office manager.

"(Family Circle) is not really the closest to my home or the expressway anymore, but I like them because I trust the teachers," said Rossio, who commutes 45-60 minutes to get to work.

The crunch that commuting can put on free time also might steer some parents toward extras such as added music and dance classes offered for a fee at Suncrest Day Care Center, 1455 Suncrest Drive in Lapeer, said director Cathy Carey.

"It's the kind of class that families would typically do after school," she said. "But this way, at the end of a day of rushing around, they can focus on being a family."

Back child-support deal gets plenty of interest

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Sunday, February 05, 2006

By Ken Palmer
kpalmer@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6385

The phones are ringing off the hook from people who want in on the state's new child support discount offer, one of its best enticements yet for paying off large debts, a local Friend of the Court official says.

"This is really a bargain," said Jennie E. Barkey, who runs the Genesee County FOC office. "If your kid is over the age of 18, 75 percent of what's owed to the state, including interest, is dumped.

"There's been an avalanche of inquiries. I don't know how many are going to qualify, but it's worth a shot."

The deal from the state Department of Human Services would affect about 25,000 Michigan parents who stopped paying support while their former spouses received cash welfare benefits. It requires the delinquent parents to pay 25 percent of the back child support owed to the state, 100 percent of the back child support owed to former spouses and 100 percent of fees owed to the friend of the court.

The deal is only open to parents who are no longer paying support because their children are older than 18.

Another condition: They must have made a payment since Dec. 31, 2003, although Barkey said the FOC might be able to negotiate on that point.

"If you haven't made a payment since that date, you might still qualify for the program, so it's worth investigating," she said.

The program runs through April 30.

"We consider this to be a win for everybody," Marilyn Stephen, director of the state Department of Human Services' Office of Child Support, said.

Published February 4, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Cleared of murder, man now owes \$38K in back child support \$100 a week order added up during 13 years in prison

Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS - A man who spent 13 years in prison after being wrongly convicted of murder faces a debt of more than \$38,000 in child-support payments that started accumulating while he was locked up.

Larry Souter, 53, who lives in the Grand Rapids area, had been scheduled to appear this week in Kent County Circuit Court to explain why he has fallen behind in his payments, but the hearing was postponed because of a conflict with his attorney's schedule.

A new hearing date has not yet been set.

Souter has had trouble finding a job since being released from prison last spring, his lawyer, John Smietanka, said Friday. Souter previously worked as a handyman and a truck driver.

"He wants to pay. It's just a matter of working it out in some way he can afford," Smietanka said. "He's looking for anything to allow him to get on with his life. He hates being idle."

Souter was convicted in 1992 in the death of Kristi Ringler, who was found shortly before 3 a.m. on Aug. 25, 1979, lying in the center of state Route 37 near White Cloud in Newaygo County. She died later that day in a Grand Rapids hospital.

Through the years, medical experts disagreed about the nature of Ringler's fatal injury. One said she likely received the wound after being struck by an automobile; another said the injury matched the shape of a whiskey bottle found alongside the highway.

In 1991, after one expert reiterated his belief in the likelihood of the whiskey bottle theory, Souter was charged with murder.

Prosecutors accused Souter, who had just met Ringler in a bar on the night of her death, of killing her. He was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 20 to 60 years in prison.

Defense attorneys fought the conviction and found that evidence that could have helped Souter at trial was lost or missing, including police reports suggesting Ringler was hit by a motor home's mirror.

A federal judge released Souter last April 1.

In 1987, before his conviction, Souter was ordered to pay \$100 a week in his divorce with Christine Souter. He stopped paying when he went to prison in 1992 but didn't ask to have payments suspended until 1995.

Court documents show that in 1997, he owed \$23,000 in back support. As of last month, interest and penalties had pushed it to \$38,082.25.

Federal law prohibits judges from retroactively wiping out such debts, Smietanka told The Grand Rapids Press for a story published Thursday. The lawyer has worked on Souter's case since 1997.

David Sarnacki, an attorney for Souter's ex-wife, wrote in a court filing that his client "has endured the substantial burden of raising her two children without defendant's contribution of child support."

Family role in foster care boosted

Monday, February 06, 2006

By Ted Roelofs
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Looking back, Tara Hollander can see there was nothing wrong with the foster family that took her in several years ago.

She was removed from her home in 2000 after her father was accused and later convicted of criminal sexual conduct.

The Plainfield Township foster care couple lived in what felt to her like a rich person's house, a ranch home in a nice neighborhood. They did their best to provide a safe and loving home.

But to Hollander, 20, it was alienating -- and scary.

She was used to apartment complexes or run-down homes with bad plumbing and creaky floors. Her new home had gleaming appliances and a marble fireplace. She couldn't sleep. She got in fights with her foster mother just about every week.

"I would yell at her and tell her: 'You're not my mother.'"

Now on her own after three years in foster care, Hollander wishes she had the option of staying with relatives back then, a choice Bethany Christian Services hopes to expand with a new program and a five-year, \$1.5 million federal grant.

"The goal is to increase the number of kids in foster care in permanent homes and strengthen their connection with extended family members," said Sharon LaNoue, who is supervising the program for Bethany.

The program also is designed to cut back on the number of children in foster care who "age out" of the system with insufficient social support at 18 or 19, unprepared for adult life on their own. Instead, it aims to connect children in long-term foster care or institutional placements with family connections that can lead to adoption.

"Our job is to find the potential families for these kids," LaNoue said.

Savator Selden-Johnson, district manager for children and adult services for Kent County's Department of Human Services, estimates 50 children age 13 and older in county foster care or institutions could be referred to the program in the next year.

In some cases, Selden-Johnson said, it might lead to permanent placement with relatives. In others, it might simply help build nurturing ties with relatives or their birth family.

"We hope that kids will feel they have someone they can turn to in the best of times and the worst of times," she said.

But since many children in foster care end up living with family members after they leave the system, Selden-Johnson said, it makes sense to build those relationships sooner rather than later.

"Kids feel that we make decisions for them, that we do not acknowledge their voice," she said.

In fact, statistics from a 2005 state social service study found that one-third of children who had left the foster care system reported living with biological parents or relatives.

"So many kids, when they leave the foster care system, end up back with the very people they were removed from years ago," Selden-Johnson said. "Why not do this in a planned and safe way?"

The grant is funding two full-time and several part-time staff workers at Bethany, in addition to paying for training and other expenses tied to the program.

The project is beginning in Grand Rapids and will be added next year to Muskegon County, then opened up to children in the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange System.

Hollander finally left her foster care home in December 2004 and now lives in a Southeast Side Grand Rapids house with her boyfriend, her brother, two uncles and a step-uncle. Though she dropped out of high school two credits shy of graduation, she plans to finish and go on to college.

All things considered, she's comfortable where she is now.

"I'd rather be with family than trying to get along in someone else's home," she said.

Foster GrandparentingDetails

Monday, February 06, 2006

Kalamazoo Gazette

Organization: Kalamazoo County Foster Grandparent Program.

Address: 918 Jasper St., Kalamazoo (Senior Services).

Who it serves: Those 60 or older who live in Kalamazoo County and who want to work with children and who also meet income guidelines.

Contact person: Karen Betley.

Phone: (269) 382-0515.

How to get involved: Program accepts donations, particularly to help with transportation costs for those working with children. Those interested in participating also are encouraged to call.

Published February 6, 2006
[From the Lansing State Journal]

Gays and lesbians support adoption measure Parents who are not married would get rights

By Derek Wallbank
Capital News Service

Beverly Davidson of Ann Arbor considers herself a good mother. She works to put food on the table, pay bills and provide health coverage for her infant daughter.

"I hope and pray every day that I remain healthy and can continue my employment so that I can provide insurance and other benefits to my daughter," said Davidson, who lives with a female partner "because if anything happened to me, my partner would have a difficult time providing these benefits to her without an adoption."

Davidson hopes that lawmakers will pass a law to allow unmarried couples - including gays and lesbians - to jointly adopt or, in her case, allow her partner to adopt and gain legal status as a parent.

Under Michigan law, unmarried couples cannot jointly adopt children.

That restriction has led some terminally ill mothers with live-in partners to give up their parental rights so their partners could adopt their children, said Rep. Paul Condino, D-Southfield.

But the bill that Condino sponsored faces an uphill battle as many lawmakers in the Republican-controlled Legislature balk at the idea of allowing same-sex couples to adopt children.

"We should make every effort to provide a stable family environment for those children, and I believe this legislation weakens that effort," said Rep. John Moolenaar, R-Midland.

The bill was introduced in the House in November. So far, no hearings have been scheduled.

Good families can look many different ways, said Brent Bilodeau, director of the Office of Lesbian, Bi, Gay and Transgender (LBGT) Concerns at Michigan State University.

"What is most important is that a child is raised in a home with a loving environment," he said.

But Gary Glenn, president of the Midland-based American Family Association of Michigan, said putting children in households with people who engage in homosexual activities puts them in unhealthy environments.

He cited studies that assert that gay people are more likely than heterosexuals to be depressed or have suicidal tendencies.

Bilodeau countered that those traits are seen more often in young people, and that many gay adults have overcome such problems.

"I think there are lots of adults who are LGBT who are really fit to be parents," he said.

Gay rights advocates concede that with the November 2004 passage of Proposal 2, defining marriage as between one man and one woman, expanding adoption rights may be a tough sell politically.

Rep. Bill Van Regenmorter, R-Georgetown Township, the chair of the House Judiciary Committee, said the panel has close to 300 pieces of legislation before it, and that Condino's bill isn't scheduled for a hearing.

"If there's anything that deals with traditional family values, we have an obligation to be very careful," he said.

Ultimately, the prospects for approval may hinge on whether legislators decide that people like Davidson can provide a good home environment for children.

"There are so many things that go into being a good parent," said Davidson. "And sexual orientation is not one of them."

Published February 5, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Holman: Combatting delinquency: Pay now or later

Ingham juvenile justice system moving forward

Three years have passed since Ingham County voters approved the Juvenile Justice Millage to detain and treat disturbed and delinquent youths.

Before the millage, the Family Court had programs in place for juveniles passing through the court system. But it was time to make some improvements.

The Youth Center, a 24-bed secure detention facility, was often crowded. There were more than a dozen youths in out-of-state detention facilities at a given time. The range of detention and non-detention programming was insufficient. Public and private services related to substance abuse, sex offender services, anger management and family services needed to be used more efficiently.

Now, the annual millage funding makes it possible to broaden the range of programming (what we call the continuum of care) so that juveniles receive sanctions and services that are appropriate for their situations and they are not placed in settings that are too severe.

Most of the annual millage funding is matched with state child care funds so our millage dollars go twice as far.

Some of the enhancements that have been implemented in the last three years include adding staff to improve security and treatment at the Youth Center; contracting for more non-jail-like detention/treatment programming for both girls and boys; and adding staff to some of the existing non-detention and home-based programs.

A new assessment process was implemented to ensure that juveniles are placed in the most appropriate programs. The assessment involves evaluating each juvenile's family circumstances, school and work issues, offense history, behavior and personality, substance abuse history, leisure activities and other factors.

The data also can be used to analyze the range of programming in the system. It helps the courts and the county determine how many juveniles need secure detention (a jail-like setting), how many need detention but not in a jail-like setting, and how many need day treatment programs where they remain in their homes and report daily for treatment and services.

The enhancements to our juvenile justice system yielded some positive results.

The Youth Center no longer experiences crowding. The girls' detention facilities offer programming that is more appropriate for girls. The assessment process is more thorough.

However, many program improvements are still needed. Juveniles continue to be placed out-of-state, but the goal is to soon replace most of the out-of-state placements with appropriate programming in the community, some of which may be alternatives to detention.

An ongoing assessment of the system is under way, and the county will continue to adjust programming so that it is always getting better.

The Ingham County Board of Commissioners, working in conjunction with the Family Court and local service providers (mainly the Youth Violence Prevention Coalition) has used millage funds cautiously.

Our pace has been measured, but it is important to bring the juvenile justice community together, using the funds wisely to develop a juvenile justice system that improves the lives of juveniles in Ingham County.

Boy, 13, guilty of 2 felony charges

Youth pleads in case of assault on girl, 7, in library rest room

Saturday, February 04, 2006

BY TOM TOLEN

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

A Brighton teen charged in the Dec. 13 sexual assault of a 7-year-old girl in a library rest room Friday pleaded guilty to two felony charges in a plea agreement worked out between his attorney and the Livingston County Prosecutor's Office.

At a hearing, the 13-year-old youth pleaded guilty to two charges, including second degree criminal sexual conduct and gross indecency. The two other charges, first degree criminal sexual conduct and accosting for immoral purposes, were dismissed as part of the agreement. The case would have gone to trial Feb. 15 had the plea not been accepted.

The hearing Friday was in Livingston County Juvenile Court before court referee Kathleen Oemke. Neither the boy's parents nor his attorney, Mitch Perrault, would comment on the agreement, and Prosecutor David Morse was unavailable for comment.

"I think people will be happy this is resolved," said Brighton District Library Director Charlene Huget.

Since the incident, four cameras have been installed in the parking lot and four inside the building, at Library Drive and Orndorf Drive in the city of Brighton. "They really are a deterrent to crime," said Huget, emphasizing no attempt was made to hide the cameras.

Three of the video cameras are in the youth area and one is inside the entrance to the library, which gives it a view of the entrance to the men's rest room. "Our idea was to protect the children so the parents can leave them for a couple of minutes and do their own selection," Huget said.

Huget says their mere presence should act as a deterrent and help prevent future occurrences.

"We can access the cameras from every staff computer," she said.

The teen faces sentencing at 1:30 p.m. March 6. Morse has said the court has wide discretionary powers in sentencing juveniles. He could be sentenced to the W.J. Maxey Boys Training Center in Green Oak Township (for the most serious juvenile offenders) until he reaches 21. Or he could be placed in a foster home, sentenced to probation or fined. Until his sentencing, the boy will remain in a Washtenaw County juvenile detention facility.

The youth also is a suspect in another incident involving a girl under the age of 13, which was being investigated by Michigan State Police. That case is on hold according to Detective Sean Furlong. "We're still working with the victim, trying to get a clear picture of what happened," Furlong said Friday.

Tom Tolen can be reached at ttolen@livingstoncommunitynews.com or at 810-844-2009.

February 6, 2006

Homeless pack special parties Agencies hope Super Bowl experience will lead to long-term changes in how city cares for needy.

Brad Heath / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- The football food came out a little before kickoff: chili, popcorn, hot dogs and soda -- standard Super Bowl party fare if ever there was such a thing.

But this party was hardly standard.

As the Super Bowl began, nearly 200 people in worn jackets and weathered hats planted themselves around rows of long tables, clapping loudly as the game bellowed on a pair of big-screen TVs. On Sunday, when the Super Bowl came to the nation's poorest big city, this was the party the city threw for its homeless.

They came to see the game. They came for food and because the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries was giving away coats and sweaters. They came to escape Sunday's stinging wind. "I need to see the game somewhere," Donald Nelson said, leaning back in his chair. "Gotta be out of the cold and see the game."

A handful of service agencies took part, putting on events at shelters and other centers. The biggest was at the Rescue Mission's activity center, less than a mile from Ford Field. Chad Audi, the mission's chief operating officer, said several hundred people had been through the doors since the three-day party began Friday.

For Anthony Williams, the reason was simple: "I got nowhere else to go," he said.

Earlier, at a walk-in center run by Neighborhood Service Organization, men slouched in chairs watching pregame specials on a pair of TV screen. Two slapped an orange ball back and forth across a pingpong table. On the door, a weathered sign declared "the party is right here," and inside, the center's director, Ronald Riggs, lobbed Super Bowl trivia at the crowd.

On the coldest nights, as many as 300 people pack the center's pale green main room. Sunday, when the temperature was about 30 degrees, there were far fewer. "When the weather gets really cold, that's when people come in," Riggs said.

"I'm here to get out of the cold," Robert Shaw said, slouched in a chair in front of the television. "I love Detroit, and it's good to have this here."

Detroit is banking on the international attention from Sunday's game to finally erase some of the stains on its reputation. But dealing with the homeless posed a delicate challenge for Super Bowl organizers. If -- as many of the homeless think -- the goal was to keep them off the streets, it appeared to have worked.

Sunday afternoon, as thousands of people packed downtown for the last of the city's pre-Super Bowl spectacle, few homeless people ventured onto the frigid sidewalks. A few men blew on saxophones or harmonicas around the Winter Blast, collecting a few dollars in change, but said they weren't homeless.

Audi views that as a measure of success. Fewer people on the streets means more people with a roof over their heads and something to eat. He said he's optimistic the city's Super Bowl experience will lead to longer-term changes in how the city cares for its homeless. Most of the people who came through the mission's doors had not been to a shelter before, Audi said, and as of Sunday evening, 55 of them had signed up for treatment, counseling or transitional housing. "If it takes a party to bring people out, let's do that. Let's do it every year," he said. "Our real work is going to start Monday."

You can reach Brad Heath at (313) 222-2563 or bheath@detnews.com.

February 6, 2006

Slain homeless man found near festival Body discovered in alley close to Griswold and Washington; death may be result of dispute.

David Shepardson / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- A homeless man was stabbed to death early Sunday -- the second person killed in downtown Detroit near the Motown Winter Blast on Super Bowl weekend, police said.

A man believed to be around 50, with no ID and with several layers of clothing, was found stabbed to death in an alley near Griswold and Washington Boulevard about 12:15 a.m. Sunday, said Second Deputy Police Chief James Tate.

Police said the death may have been the result of a dispute between the man and someone else who lived in the area. The body was found a few hundred yards from the Winter Blast, which drew tens of thousands of spectators.

Detroiters Devon Lowery, 27, found the body of the man he knew as "Mike" and summoned police.

He said the man was a well-known downtown panhandler to whom he regularly gave a couple dollars.

"I knew something was wrong, and I had to get help fast," Lowery said. "He was laying there I knew who he was."

No arrests have been made in either that death or the fatal shooting early Saturday morning of Kyle Smith, 24, of Detroit.

Smith, formerly of Tecumseh, Mich., worked as a dispatcher for a Taylor company. She was killed after an apparent shoving incident outside a Detroit bar on Woodward. Smith, 24, was fatally shot and a friend, Jeff Peterson, 27, of Dearborn was seriously wounded outside Maverick's Good Life Lounge on Woodward Avenue. The two had been walking around Campus Martius participating in the Motown Winter Blast events along with thousands of others. Also early Sunday morning, a pedestrian was slightly injured in an accident at West Fort and Second when he darted into traffic in an attempt to cross the street, said Michigan State Police Lt. Harold Love. He was taken to a local hospital for a cut to his head.

The Wayne County Sheriff's Department and other police agencies also were on the lookout for pickpockets, and had distributed photos of suspected thieves sent from police departments around the country, including several from Kentucky, said Sgt. Larry Crider, a spokesman for the Wayne County Sheriff's Office.

A fugitive roundup before the Super Bowl netted 201 wanted people, including probation violators as well as those wanted on outstanding warrants. "This has been a very successful program," Crider said. Detroit Police also disclosed that they had towed 656 cars in downtown since last Sunday -- including 101 cars Saturday -- as downtown streets have been off-limits to parking for the week.

Detroit News Staff Writer David Josar contributed to this report. You can reach David Shepardson at (313) 222-2028 or dshepardson@detnews.com.

County's welfare rolls swell by 35%

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Sunday, February 05, 2006

By Kris Turner

kturner@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6249

A jump of more than 35 percent in Genesee County's welfare recipients since 2002 is likely due to a loss of manufacturing jobs and employer cutbacks, some experts say.

Shirley Campbell, 39, of Flint, is part of the trend. She joined the welfare rolls in 2004, four years after losing her clerical job at General Motors' Buick City complex.

She had supported herself and her daughter with a series of temporary jobs but couldn't land a permanent position because she has only a high school diploma.

"Because of my lack of education, I kept getting turned down," Campbell said. "When people say it's hard to find a job, it's the truth."

Trying to maintain a sense of normalcy became a constant struggle, said Campbell, a single mother. Because she was renting to own the furniture in her home, most of her possessions were repossessed, including her 15-year-old daughter's bedroom set.

"She had to move in and sleep with me," Campbell said.

Campbell received health care, food and cash assistance for about eight months, but knew finding a job would be the key to getting her life back on track.

Visiting the Work First program, Campbell got a job doing office work at the Michigan Sleep and Diagnostics and Research Center, 3237 Beecher Road, Flint Township. Now, she receives only Medicaid benefits. The Work First program attempts to match unemployed people with a position that matches their level of education and experience.

"There's no excuse if you can't find a job," Campbell said. "You really can get out there and look."

Campbell represents most of the people on welfare, said Denise Chambers, director of the Genesee County Department of Human Services.

Single mothers constitute a large portion of the more than 73,000 people using state aid in the county.

"Most of the time, there is a life change that causes a person to use

assistance," Chambers said. "Most people are not lifers - they are on assistance for a couple years until they are able to get their life in order."

There are several reasons for the spike in the numbers, said Maureen Sorbet, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services. Among them: a difficult job market, greater efforts to

QUICK TAKE

Welfare by the numbers

Estimated Genesee County population in 2004: 443,947

Total number of people on welfare (ranging from

Medicaid to cash assistance) in

Genesee County:

2002: 53,697

2003: 60,003

2004: 67,217

2005: 73,219*

2005 welfare numbers for other counties:

Oakland County:

56,223*

Livingston County:

5,088*

Shiawassee

County: 7,824*

* As of November

Source: Michigan

Department of

Human Services,

www.mich.gov/dhs

make people aware of welfare programs they can receive and an increasing need for food and health care.

"Cash assistance has been pretty flat," Sorbet said. "We've been active in doing some outreach to low-income individuals. We've had a continuing trend upward since 2000."

Reforms enacted on the federal and state levels in the 1990s changed welfare so it was harder to get services if a person wasn't disabled or employed, she said.

Welfare numbers that shrank under Republican Gov. John Engler have increased since he left office. In 2000, only 1,116,000 people statewide were using welfare. The number was up to about 1,583,000 in 2005.

Terri Winegarden, a staff attorney for the Center for Civil Justice in Saginaw, attributed the increase to an unstable job market.

Only 28 percent of all people receiving assistance in the county are employed, though officials estimate 60 percent to 70 percent can work. The problem is where they can find a job, some said.

"We cannot expect people to work down in Oakland County or Livingston County when they don't have a reliable way to get to and from work," Chambers said. "Genesee County needs employment inside the county for these people."

To make getting a job easier, such groups as the Flint-based Career Alliance Inc., try to match the jobless with potential employers.

Most people who come to the alliance were either laid off or lost their job, said Pam Loving, the group's president and CEO.

"We might call them the new poor. These are people who have lost their standard of living."

But the number of jobs in the area has actually increased, said Mark Perry, an associate professor of economics at the University of Michigan-Flint.

"There's been more than 7,000 jobs added since the first of last year - we are becoming more diversified," Perry said.

But because many of the people using state assistance lack an education, it can be hard to put them in those positions, though, Loving said.

State legislators, meanwhile, want to put limits on how long welfare recipients can get aid.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm vetoed legislation last year that would have imposed a lifetime 48-month limit on benefits even for those who comply with work and training requirements. There currently is no time limit on how long someone can receive welfare in Michigan.

Some Republicans say welfare benefits are too generous and open-ended.

"Really, there is no limit to how long they are going to be stuck in poverty," said Matt Resch, spokesman for House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi. "We need to encourage them to move into the work force."

The issue is likely to come up again soon because the current rules expire at the end of the year.

Even though the future of welfare is unclear and more people continue to use it in Genesee County, no one should give up hope, Campbell said. Finding a job only takes a matter of time.

"Never give up, and keep on trying," she said. "You have to keep moving for your kids."

Published February 6, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Granholt to present \$40B budget proposal

Associated Press

Gov. Jennifer Granholm this week will lay out her latest spending plan for everything from K-12 schools and state universities to prisons and health care for the poor.

Budget director Mary Lannoye is scheduled Thursday to present lawmakers with the Democratic governor's roughly \$40 billion budget proposal for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1.

The state's main account, the general fund, is expected to have 2 percent more revenue than in the current year, and the school aid fund will be 3.2 percent higher.

But tough decisions could loom for Granholm and the Republican-controlled Legislature because the higher cost of employee contracts, more Medicaid and welfare caseloads, and possible federal funding cuts could outpace any increases.

Ari Adler, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming, said spending levels for state departments and programs shouldn't automatically be higher than they are now.

"Can we afford to do that? If not, we will need to make tough decisions again," Adler said.

Few details were available about Granholm's upcoming proposal, though Lannoye said last month that it would be a tough year.

K-12 schools, however, could see an increase in funding because the school aid fund is generally considered to be healthy.

Thursday, February 02, 2006

Medicaid cuts, welfare reform target poor

By Daniel C. Vock, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Welfare recipients and the nation's poor requiring health care are in for some jolting news from Washington, D.C.

The Republican-led Congress sent President Bush Wednesday (Feb. 1) a package of Medicaid and welfare reforms that will impose tougher work requirements on welfare recipients and will squeeze \$6.9 billion in savings from the giant government health insurance program, in part, by getting poor patients to pay more for treatment.

The GOP muscled the measure through Congress without a single Democratic vote, clearing the House 216-214 Wednesday after squeaking through the Senate in December on a 51-50 tally with Vice President Dick Cheney casting the deciding vote.

The controversial measure meets many of the items on the wish list of the nation's governors for reining in the runaway costs of Medicaid, which covers 53 million poor Americans who are young, pregnant, disabled or elderly.

It also fulfills states' calls to officially extend the federally financed welfare program, called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

But the legislation has drawn fire from Democrats, including governors who helped push for Medicaid reform, because it jeopardizes social services for the poorest Americans.

Last year, the nation's governors mounted an aggressive campaign to convince lawmakers to rein in the costs of Medicaid, the \$338 billion federal-state program that covers more Americans than any other health insurance carrier.

The bill awaiting Bush's signature, which is likely, contains many of the items they championed: It lets states make patients pay more for prescription drugs and hospital visits. It makes it harder for seniors to give away their money and then ask the government to pay their nursing home bills. And it squeezes drug companies to give states better deals on medicines.

The final package also includes changes in the rules governing TANF, the cash assistance program for poor families, to impose tougher work participation standards and greater federal scrutiny over state welfare-to-work programs. It also trims federal funds for child support enforcement, which Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack (D) told *Stateline.org* was his biggest concern because parents who now depend on those checks would look to states for more social services if their child support no longer arrives.

The budget bill that cleared the House Wednesday would save the federal government \$35 billion over the next five years, according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

Of that, more than \$6.9 billion would come from cost controls for Medicaid. States would likely save nearly that much for Medicaid, too, because states and the federal government share costs for the program. The savings amount to less than 1 percent of Medicaid spending. But states still can expect their Medicaid bills to go up. States projected that their Medicaid costs would level out at 5.5 percent this year, after six years of growing more than 7 percent. The rapid increases have gobbled up state budgets, and states now shell out more money on Medicaid than they do for elementary and secondary education, when including federal money

spent by the states.

Diane Rowland, executive director of the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, said the philosophical shift in the congressional changes was more significant than the legislation's financial impact.

Traditionally, Medicaid was designed to offer broad-based protections for the low-income people it covers. But the latest retooling, which authorizes co-payments and premium increases, brings it more in line with recent moves by Bush and private insurers to give patients more control directing their health care, she said.

The rationale for using "cost consciousness" to drive down health costs may not work with people living in poverty, Rowland said. Families living on \$16,000 likely would just forego medicine or a doctor's visit instead of paying a premium, she said.

"They already have a lot of cost consciousness," Rowland said. "This introduces fiscal responsibility on those who can least afford it."

The "cost-sharing" measures would affect about 13 million people – or about a fifth of those on Medicaid – by 2015, according to CBO estimates.

Further, states would be allowed to charge monthly premiums to families who are slightly better off (\$24,900 for a family of three). The CBO projected it would lead to 45,000 enrollees leaving the program or never applying in the first place by 2015.

Another piece of the legislation would target seniors who shed assets in the five years before applying for Medicaid. Many seniors turn to Medicaid to cover nursing home care, and, indeed, roughly two-thirds of patients in nursing homes are on Medicaid.

Such treatment is extremely expensive. Obtained privately in New York, for example, it could cost more than \$64,000 a year. States want seniors to pay for as much as their own care as possible and penalize those who donate their money and property before asking for government assistance.

The new law will clamp down on that practice.

First, it allows the states to look back five years, instead of three, when a senior applies to Medicaid to find out whether they've given away their assets.

Second, it requires those who gave away property to sit out for a certain penalty period, depending on the size of the gift, starting the day they applied for Medicaid. The penalty used to start on the date of the transfer, making it moot in many cases.

Advocates for the elderly worry that the changes will leave seniors without a way to pay for care when they need it most. A grandparent who gives money to a grandchild for college or donates money to a church may not anticipate that he would be in a nursing home within five years, they point out.

The provision is also troubling to the nursing homes themselves.

Many patients enter nursing homes paying for their care but then rapidly run out of money. Usually, they turn to Medicaid, and the program then picks up the tab. But if Medicaid won't pay their bills, the nursing homes may be forced to absorb the costs until the patient qualifies for aid. For many reasons, legal and ethical, nursing homes can't and won't kick out patients already under their care.

"Ultimately, what the problem is, is that you're shifting responsibility ... back to the provider," said Jonathan Eames, executive director of the Washington Health Care Association, a group of 350 nursing homes and assisted-living facilities in Washington state.

Still, the costliest and most immediate impact of the legislation will be on drug companies.

The states obtained more leverage with the pharmaceutical industry under the bill, including a

new formula for the baseline price they pay for drugs for Medicaid patients and more information from the drug makers about the prices they charge.

The CBO estimates those changes would lead to nearly \$3.6 billion in savings to the federal government, which pays about 57 percent of Medicaid expenses nationally. States would save nearly the same.

Send your comments on this story to letters@stateline.org. Selected reader feedback will be posted in the Letters to the editor section.

Contact Daniel C. Vock at dvock@stateline.org.

February 6, 2006

Slap in the face

Editor, The Saginaw News:

A few weeks ago, Congress took up a deficit reduction bill. I was not surprised when I heard it passed, and exactly how little some members of Congress wanted the public to know about it. The bill contained a revision that cut child support enforcement funding, used to go after the "deadbeats" who don't pay child support. I bet most people didn't know that.

I don't understand how our representatives could be so cruel towards single mothers and their children.

It seems every time I turn around, that the Republican-led Congress is coming up with some ridiculous slap in the face for those who need help most in our society, such as single mothers who can barely afford to feed their children and provide for them.

While Congress was doing that, it also cut taxes for the rich -- \$56 billion dollars to those who need the money the least. That cut won't even go to the majority of people who vote for Republicans such as U.S. Rep. Dave Camp of Midland, who voted for the legislation.

Think about how you voted in 2004 and vote for what is right in 2006.

When I go to the polls this November, I know how I am going to vote. Not for Camp, but for Democrat Mike Huckleberry of Greenville, a man with values who won't vote to hand out gifts to deadbeat dads or the rich.

I plan to vote for a candidate who will protect single working mothers and their children.

Benjamin S. Fortin
Sanford

Letters for February 6

The Grand Rapids Press

Monday, February 06, 2006

Raise minimum wage

In regard to the minimum wage and the fight to get it raised: For so long we have been stuck at \$5.15 per hour. I think it is about time to raise it so that people working at this wage can make a more affordable and decent standard of living; they deserve better.

It has become exceedingly tough for these people to live off such a low wage for such a long period of time. Let's show them that we care, show them a little respect and dignity and pay them a just wage.

The cost of living is constantly going up but the minimum wage does not. Does this seem fair? According to our leaders in Washington, a raise would hurt small businesses trying to move in and establish themselves within the community, basically the profits of these companies. But what about the workers? Who is thinking about their livelihood? Surely not our leaders in Washington.

When it's time to vote on a raise for our congressman, it will pass without a doubt. But when a minimum raise question comes up, our leaders say it will ruin the infrastructure of our economy. Now, who's kidding who? What kind of leadership qualities are they showing us in Washington? This is a basic lack of self-respect for people making this undignified and unjust wage. Let's do something about this problem and sign the Michigan minimum wage proposal petition that is floating around so that it can get on the ballot and Michigan voters -- and not our leaders -- can decide our fate. They are not thinking about the common good for society.

STAN SOLTYS JR./Grand Rapids

Kalamazoo Gazette

Monday, February 6, 2006

Backs increase in minimum wage

A moral tragedy that gets hidden every day in the shadows of poverty is the incredibly low minimum wage received by our working poor. The minimum wage is only \$5.15 an hour. As Rev. Robert W. Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, and a sponsor of the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign, notes, "A job should keep you out of poverty, not keep you in it. Full-time minimum wage workers earn \$10,700 a year, which is about \$5,000 below the poverty line for a family of three. This is a moral outrage."

Our Congress cannot seem to get itself together to pass legislation to support a more humane minimum wage while spending millions of dollars every day to support a war in Iraq.

I hope the effort now in process to place a referendum on the Michigan ballot to raise the minimum wage in November will succeed.

Phil Kramer
Kalamazoo

Ann Arbor News

Letters

February 5, 2006

For economy to flourish, working poor need help

The hypocrisy of your Sunday editorial, "Raising minimum wage won't help much," is breathtaking (The News, Jan. 22). Your editors endorsed George W. Bush for president! And now you profess concern about poverty and runaway corporate greed? I suspect that these are crocodile tears you are displaying as you try to deny help to the poorest of our working poor, as the mistakenly "pro-business" Republicans continually do.

Business is essential to the health of our country - and putting money into the hands of people who need to spend it, rather than giving enormous tax cuts to those who don't need them, is much more conducive to business health. Henry Ford understood this when he paid his workers better-than-average wages.

Face it: Republicans' pandering to greed and power is bad for the country; they're slowly killing the goose that laid the golden egg because they don't understand a fundamental truth - only when the economy and the polity work well for every citizen will the country flourish.

C. Michael Rodemer, Ann Arbor

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 3, 2006

Granholm Appoints Jennie Barkey Judge of Genesee County Probate Court

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm today announced the appointment of Jennie E. Barkey as Judge of the Genesee County Probate Court.

Barkey, of Flint, most recently served as Genesee County Friend of the Court, supervising a staff of over 100 people. Prior to her appointment as Friend of the Court, Ms. Barkey served in private practice. She has served as president of the Michigan Friend of the Court Association and as a member of the Michigan Child Support Leadership Counsel.

Ms. Barkey earned her law degree from Thomas Cooley Law School and received her bachelor's degree from Oakland University.

She replaces Judge Allen Nelson who has resigned. Her term expires January 1, 2007. This appointment is not subject to disapproval.

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